

Research debunks assassin profiles

■ A Secret Service study, which included interviews with 23 attackers, has discredited the mental illness stereotype.

New York Times

CHICAGO — Portraits of assassins are fixed in the American mind: the deranged madman, the lonely loser obsessed with his target, the political killer following threats with violence.

These portraits are the stuff of myth, the Secret Service has concluded in "Preventing Assassination," a study of the 83 people who attacked or tried to attack an American political figure or celebrity in the past 50 years.

Agents and psychologists analyzed the lives and actions of Lee Harvey Oswald, John Hinckley and lesser players.

The study was bolstered by interviews with a special corps of collaborators, 23 of the assassins themselves.

The results, recently made available, challenge several stereotypes. Fewer than half of the assassins showed symptoms of mental illness.

Many shifted from one target to another, valuing the act more than the victim. Not one had communicated a direct threat to the target or to law-enforcement authorities.

The good news, the Secret Service said, is that assassins are recognizable, not by who they are but by what they do. Though assassins fit no physical or psychological profile, most share a pattern of behavior.

Assassination is not a spontaneous event, but a trail of action that can lead to discovery.

Lessons from the five-year research project are changing the way the Secret Service identifies and investigates people who may pose a threat to the president and other public figures. Experts outside the Secret Service say the study is helping efforts to prevent stalking, workplace assaults and other forms of targeted violence.

The emerging art of "protective intelligence" was put in the spotlight on July 24, when two policemen

were killed at the Capitol. The intentions of the accused gunman, Russell Eugene Weston Jr., may never be known.

It is known that in 1996 he was interviewed by the Secret Service after he made apparently delusional comments about President Clinton. Later, after threatening a neighbor, he was involuntarily committed to a mental hospital for paranoid schizophrenia.

Each year, the Secret Service tries to assess the risk posed by about 2,000 people. Some have made explicit or vague threats against the president or another national leader. Others expressed romantic interest in a public figure, pressed grievances that seemed unreasonable or tried to volunteer as a protector.

In most cases, as with Weston, the Secret Service finds that the person presents a low risk and the case is closed. Only about 4 percent are arrested. About 13 percent are committed for mental health treatment, many voluntarily, and often because they are a threat to themselves or others near them, not to someone under Secret Service protection.

Protective intelligence is part science, part investigation and part common sense. It is not foolproof. In 1975, for example, Secret Service agents judged that Sara Jane Moore was no threat, and police officers took a gun away from her, the day before she shot at President Ford.

Americans have long assumed that assassins fit a profile. But the Secret Service found no profile of background or description fitting enough assassins to be helpful in deciding who is dangerous. Eighty-six percent were men. Seventy-seven percent were white. The youngest was 16 and the oldest was 73.

About half the assassins were single and had never been married, and one in three had children. Almost half had gone to college. Several had successful careers. Only one in five had been arrested as an adult for a violent offense.

Forty-four percent of the assassins had histories of serious depression or despair. Fifty-four percent had a history of harassing others. Forty-one percent had made suicide threats.

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